Rereading the "Absolute" in Early Buddhism

Anthropological and Post-Structuralist Studies of the Udāna and Udanavarga Texts

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Introduction

In the history of Indian religious thought, the Buddha's position is often misunderstood as a "rejection of God". This view arises because of the absence of explicit mention of *the Creator* in his sermons. Early Buddhist texts such as *Udāna* and *Udanavarga*, however, show something much more complex: they contain expressions that allude *to a reality that is not born, uncreated, uncompounded, and unincarnated*—a concept that ontologically refers to *the* Absolute.

This phrase, if read linguistically, is not just an affirmation, but a subtle linguistic strategy to reject the personification of the Brahmanic divinity. The **anthropological** approach allows us to understand the social context in which the discourse was born, while **the post-structuralist** approach provides a tool to read how the Buddha used language to affirm, but at the same time affirm, an unspeakable transcendent reality.

This paper traces how the *Absolute* was represented, hidden, and deconstructed in early Buddhist texts. By examining the important passages of *Udāna* and *Udanavarga*, we will see that Buddha did not reject God, but rather rejected the *language of God* that binds meaning to anthropomorphic symbols.

The Social and Cultural Context of Buddhist India

To understand the Buddha's linguistic and philosophical stance, we need to look at the Indian social landscape at that time. The Brahmanic culture of the 6th century BC was characterized by a rigid caste system and a fire sacrifice rite (*agnihotra*) controlled by the Brahmins. Gods such as *Brahmā*, *Viṣṇu*, and *Śiva* became the center of worship. In Vedic texts, *Īśvara* (ईश्वर) is understood as a personal, anthropomorphic figure who eats, dresses, and even marries — with supernatural powers dripping through *avatāra*.

This *concept of Isvara* is not purely theological, but ideological. It underpins the social structure and ritual power. In the language of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, it can be said that Brahmanic religion is a *system of symbols that exudes the aura of social reality*. This is where the Buddha's radicality lies: he breaks the connection between the sacred and the social structure, between God and caste.

The Buddha's rejection of *Isvara* was not a form of atheism, but rather a *symbolic reform*. He does not deny the existence *of the Absolute*, but rejects the way in which Brahmanic society formulates and trades the sacred. It is in this sense that early Buddhism was a form *of cultural deconstruction*: the abolition of anthropomorphic myths in order for humans to access transcendent reality directly.

Language and Delay in Meaning: A Post-Structuralist Approach

Post-structuralism, especially through Jacques Derrida's thought, emphasizes that meaning is never fully present. It is always *delayed* (*différance*) and can only be understood through opposition to the other. The word "exists" means because it "does not exist"; "absolute" means because it is "relative".

The Buddha seems to have understood this mechanism long before Derrida. In his sermons, he used *negative* forms to speak of the supreme reality. He does not say "The Absolute exists", but "there is something that **is not** born, **not** created, **not** consummated".

Such a grammatical structure creates *an empty space* where the subject in question cannot be identified. Language is used not to mention, but to *deny*. Post-structuralistically, it is a strategy to liberate meaning from an oppressive system of signs. In the Brahmanic social context, this means freeing the "divine" from the monopoly of ritual symbols.

Text Analysis: Udāna and Udanavarga

The most famous part of *the Udāna* that speaks of *the Absolute* is found in **Udāna VIII:3 (Tatiya-nibbānasuttaṃ).**

Pali text (diacritical romanization):

"Atthi bhikkhave ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhataṃ.
No ce taṃ bhikkhave abhavissā ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhataṃ,na-y-idha
jātassa bhūtassa katassa saṅkhatassa nissaraṇaṃ paññāyetha.
Yasmā ca kho bhikkhave atthi ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhataṃ,tasmā
jātassa bhūtassa katassa saṅkhatassa nissaraṇaṃ paññāyatī."
(Udāna VIII:3, ed. Ānandajoti Bhikkhu, 2008, pp. 261–262).

Translation:

"There is, bhikkhus, something that is not born (*ajātaṃ*), does not incarnate (*abhūtaṃ*), is not created (*akataṃ*), and is not compounded (*asaṅkhataṃ*). If there is nothing that is not born, not incarnated, not created, not compounded, then there can be no liberation from birth, incarnation, creation, and fertilization. But because there is something that is not born, not incarnated, not created, not compounded, then liberation from all of that is reality."

Semantic Analysis:

The four key terms here—*ajātaṃ, abhūtaṃ, akataṃ, asaṅkhataṃ*—are all **passive participles**, not nouns. This means that the Buddha was not pointing to "something" (noun), but rather *negating the process*.

- *Ajātaṃ* (unborn) rejected the concept of biological or cosmogonistic origin.
- *Abhūtaṃ* (unincarnated) rejects the transmutation of form.
- *Akataṃ* (not created) rejects the idea of the creator.
- *Asaṅkhataṃ* (unorganized) rejects the idea of composition or element.

With these four negations, the Buddha removed all categories of Brahmanic discourse on creation, incarnation, and change. But paradoxically, through this denial, he reveals the existence of the *Unspeakable*—a reality that exists outside the cause-and-effect system (*saṅkhata*).

In the post-structuralist framework, this is a form of *apopathic theology*—reality presented through the absence of language. In an anthropological framework, it reflects an attempt to dialogue metaphysical understanding with the cultural horizon of a highly ritualistic society.

Sanskrit text: Udanavarga XXVI (Nirvāṇavarga)

अजातं अभूतं अकर्तं असंस्कृतं च संपश्यन् संस्कृतात् परिमुच्यते ॥ २६.२१॥
ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akartaṃ asaṃskṛtaṃ ca saṃpaśyan saṃskṛtāt parimucyate

(Udanavarga XXVI.21, ed. Franz Bernhard, 1965).

Translation:

"He who sees the unborn (*ajātaṃ*), the incarnate (*abhūtaṃ*), the uncreated (*akartaṃ*), the unstructured (*asaṃskṛtaṃ*), will be liberated from the arranged (*saṃskṛta*)."

Philological Analysis:

The above Sanskrit text parallels the Pali version, but uses a different root word: *akartaṃ* instead of *akataṃ*. In Sanskrit, the form *akartaṃ* more explicitly means "without a doer" (a-kartr), not just "not made". Semantically, this negates the *agency* (actor) as well as the *process*.

In other words, *the Absolute* in the Sanskrit version is even more radical: not just something that is not created, but something that *neither creator nor creation is involved*. This is where we find echoes of ancient post-structuralism—the highest meaning arises precisely from a total denial of the structure of subject-object relations.

Lexical Context: "Asaṅkhata" and "Asaṃskṛta"

The word *saṅkhata* (Pali) or *saṃskṛta* (Sans.) is derived from the root *√kṛ* (to make, to do), with the prefix *saṃ-* (together, to unite). It literally means "something that is arranged, made, or conditioned".

The Buddha used his negative form, *asaṅkhata*, to describe a reality that has no conditions. In linguistic logic, this is a binary game:

saṅkhata ↔ asaṅkhata is made ↔ not made
relative ↔ absolute

Thus, *the Absolute* in Buddhism is not a "divine being", but rather a non-conditional dimension that makes liberation (*nissaraṇa*) possible. It is not defined by essence, but by *its liberation from all essence.*

Duality and Semiotic Relations: The Absolute and the Relative

In an anthropological framework, Brahmanic societies understood the world hierarchically: there were divine (the gods) and some profane (human). But in the Buddhist framework, the dichotomy is fused into a relational system: everything that "exists" (*bhūta*) depends on cause (*hetu-pratyaya*).

Thus, the "relative" is all that is born of cause; The "absolute" is the one that has no cause. But the two terms mark each other, not negate each other.
This is the logic *of non-dualistic relationality* that characterizes Buddhism.

संस्कृतं च असंस्कृतं च द्वयं एव विद्यमानं।
saṃskṛtaṃ ca asaṃskṛtaṃ ca dvayaṃ eva vidyamānaṃ

"The structured and the unstructured both exist—yet differ in their nature." *(to paraphrase Udanavarga XXVI.22–23).*

Thus, *the Absolute* is not intended as a separate entity outside the world, but rather as an *inner dimension* of reality itself. It is a condition in which all forms cease without negating the existence of forms.

Post-structuralism calls this kind of phenomenon *differential space*: the meaning of the "Absolute" lives only in relation to the "relative", but cannot be reduced to it.

Subject Procrastination: Who Invented?

It is interesting to note that both Pali and Sanskrit texts use **the passive form** without a subject. In the sentence *"who was created"* or *"who was not created"*, there is no description of who the creator is.

In Brahmanic culture, every creation is always associated with a *kartr* (doer)—either *Brahmā*, *Viṣṇu*, or *Śiva*. But Buddha removed the perpetrator from the grammar. Linguistically, this is a liberation from personal theology. Philosophically, this is a *deconstruction of the idea of cosmic ego*.

This is where Buddhism shows its semiotic ingenuity: by refusing to mention the subject, it rejects the trap of anthropomorphism. But by using the terms "created" and "not created", he keeps the meaning *of the Absolute* referable, even if it has never been identified.

Foucault might call it *a discursive strategy of subject-avoidance* —when language is deliberately made anonymous to negate the center of power. In the Buddhist context, this is a form of *the absence of the cosmic ego* (anattā) at the level of language.

The following is **Part II (continuation and closing)** of the article: **"Rereading the 'Absolute' in Early Buddhism: An Anthropological and Post-Structuralist Study of the Udāna and Udanavarga Texts"** written by **Jayanantaka**. This section includes: *Nibbāna as the Path*, *Īśvara's Rejection as Cultural Strategy*, *The Incomparable*, and *the Conclusion*.

Nibbāna as a Path, Not a Theological Goal

In *Udāna VIII:1* the Buddha delivered a sermon on *Nibbāna* at Sāvatthī, in the garden of Anāthapiṇḍika.This text became one of the most philosophical statements about reality that transcended the empirical world:

"Atthi bhikkhave tad āyatanaṃ,yattha neva pathavī, na āpo, na tejo, na vāyo;
And the Prophet

(peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said, "O Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)," he said, "O Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) ."na ayaṃ loko, na palo loko, na ubho candimasūriyā."

(Udāna VIII:1, ed. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1998)

Translation:

"There is, bhikkhus, a state in which there is no earth, water, fire, nor air; there is no infinite space, no infinite consciousness, no emptiness, no state between consciousness and unconsciousness; Not this world, not the opposite world, not the moon and the sun."

The phrase *"tad āyatanaṃ"* (that state, that dimension) becomes an important linguistic marker. Buddha used the word *āyatana*, not *bhava* (existence) or *loka* (world). In Pali, *āyatana* means "field," "realm," or "dimension of consciousness." That is, Nibbāna is not a "being" or a "place", but *a space of consciousness without conceptual boundaries*.

Symbolic Analysis:

Anthropologically, Indian society recognizes *mokṣa* as a release to the paradise of the gods. But *Nibbāna* is not another version of heaven; it is not transcendence to another world, but a *reversal of this world's way of experiencing it.*

In the symbolic language of Indian hot culture, Nibbāna (from the root nir *+ vā*, "blowing out" or "extinguishing") is the extinguishing of the fire of desire.

"Nibbuta" means *cool*, not *lost*.

As explained in the following text:

Nibbuta nuna sa eye, nibbuto nuna so pitā, nibbuta nuna sā nārī, yassāyaṃ idiso pati.
(Therīgāthā, Kisa Gotamī, v. 213)

Translation:

"Verily, peace be the mother, peace be the father, and peace be the woman who has a husband like her (Buddha)."

The word *nibbuta* here does not mean death, but rather the *inner peace extinguished by the fire of suffering.*

Post-Structuralist Interpretation:

In Derrida's logic, *Nibbāna* is "between *the signifiers*". It is present not as a new meaning, but as a *cancellation of the meaning game*. When the Buddha said "not earth, not water, not air," he was rejecting the whole system of opposition that is the basis of worldly discourse. *Thus Nibbāna* is not a theological goal, but *a linguistic event* in which language ceases to work.

Anthropologically, this is a "symbolic transformation": from the rite of external offerings to internal contemplation. By extinguishing meaning, man extinguishes suffering.

Īśvara's Rejection as a Cultural Strategy

The concept *of Īśvara (ईश्वर)* in the Vedic tradition refers to a personal deity, a masculine figure who rules over nature. In the *Upaniṣad* and *the Bhagavadgītā*, this term changes to a spiritual principle incarnate as a human being (*avatāra*), such as Śrī Kṛṣṇa.

However, for the Buddha, *Īśvara* remains a *saṅkhata* entity—created, cause-dependent, tangible, and therefore relative. He refused to equate *the Uncreated* with the figure of Isvara who had a form and a partner.

"Isvara in the Buddhist view is not the supreme reality, but rather a creation of human conception that is still bound by language and culture."

Comparative Texts from Udāna and Udanavarga:

And then there's the fact that he's a Democrat and a Democrat and a Democrat.

यत्र वेत्ति मुनिर्मौनी आत्मनः स्वात्मनात्मना॥ २६.२७॥

(Udanavarga XXVI.27, ed. Bernhard, 1965)

Translation:

"There the moon does not shine, the sun does not shine; there the Muni (the wise, the silent) realizes the Self with himself."

This text describes a space of consciousness that transcends all imagery, including cosmic imagery such as the sun and moon—symbols commonly used for the gods in the Vedas. Anthropologically, it is a *visual rejection of the old symbols of divinity*. Post-structuralistically, this is the *elimination of the center of light*—the rejection of the *metaphysics of presence* that Derrida criticized.

Thus, the Buddha's rejection of *Isvara* is not a rejection of God, but rather a rejection of *the language of power inherent in God in Brahmanic culture*. It does not remove the meaning of the "Absolute", but it does remove *the way humans name it*.

The Incomparable (Anupamā)

In *the Suttanipāta* there is a verse that describes *the Incomparable* with its serene beauty:

"Asaṃhīraṃ asaṃkuppaṃ yassa n'atthi upamā kvaci,Addhā
gamissāmi, na me atthi kaṅkhā."
(Suttanipāta 1149, ed. K.R. Norman, 2001)

Translation:

"The unshaken, the unshakable, the incomparable anywhere—
there indeed I will go; no more doubts of mine."

Linguistic and Symbolic Analysis:

The words *asaṃhīraṃ* (unshifted) and *asaṃkuppaṃ* (unshaken) refer to absolute stability. But the culmination is the word *anupamā* — "without comparison." In the Indian tradition, everything is

understood through comparison (*upamāna*), but here the Buddha negates that possibility. That is, *the Absolute* is something that cannot be explained through metaphors or analogies.

In a post-structuralist framework, this is a *total detachment from the network of meaning*. Language ceases not because of a loss of ability, but because it arrives at the limit of its function. *The Incomparable* is a "quiet space" where markers no longer work.

For symbolic anthropology, this marks a level of cultural transcendence: when human beings no longer need representation to experience the sacred.

Historical Evidence: Inscription of King Aśoka

The connection between Buddhism and the concept of a "God worthy of obedience" is also recorded in the inscription of King Aśoka, the great Buddhist ruler of the 3rd century BC. In one of the stone edifices it is written:

"Confess and believe in God who is the worthy object of obedience. For equal to this, I declare unto you, ye shall not find such a means of propitiating heaven."
(Rock Inscriptions of Aśoka: Shahbazgarhi & Girnar, trans. Cunningham, 1879, p.128).

Translation in Indonesian:

"Acknowledge and trust in God who is the object of proper obedience. For there is no other way to reconcile heaven than with that."

This inscription shows that the understanding of *the Absolute* as "God" remained alive in early Buddhism, but without anthropomorphic attributes. Anthropologically, it is a process *of transculturation of meaning*: religious language is adapted to the political and moral system without losing its spiritual core.

Conclusion

Through an anthropological and post-structuralist reading of *Udāna*, *Udanavarga*, and other early Buddhist texts, it can be concluded:

1. **The Buddha did not deny the existence of the Absolute**, but rather rejected the structure of language and symbols that imprisoned him in anthropomorphic forms such as *Isvara* or *Mahā-Brahmā*.
2. **The language of denial** ("not born, not created, not organized") is a linguistic strategy to open up a space of meaning that transcends worldly opposition.
3. **The anthropological approach** shows that the Buddha's rejection of the personal God was an attempt at social liberation from caste hegemony and Brahmanic rituals.
4. **The post-structuralist approach** reveals that the Buddhist text is a sign playing field, where the meaning of the "Absolute" is present through absence and delay.
5. In his entire discourse, **the Buddha did not tell man to worship the Absolute**, but *to be silent* in order to meet Him without the intermediary of symbols.

Thus, Buddhism is not a religion without God, but a religion that transcends the concept of God. *The Absolute* in Buddhism is not a figure, but rather a *silent space where meaning stops and freedom begins.*

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